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Skills governance and the workforce development programme

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Abstract

In the UK higher education environment, government may make efforts to encourage institutions to engage in governance structures to secure policy objectives through a steering approach. In this article connections between skills governance structures and the HEFCE-funded workforce development programme in higher education are examined in the context of the wider implementation of the Leitch Review of Skills in England. Using analysis of policy documents, submissions to a select committee inquiry, and a series of interviews undertaken at higher education institutions, limited co-ordination between skills governance and institutions is identified, which is likely to have been a consequence both of the open-ended approach taken by government to the implementation of this policy in higher education and the ineffectiveness of governance approaches as mechanisms for steering higher education institutions in the UK.

Key words: governance, steering, implementation, skills policy

Introduction

In *Higher Education at Work* (DIUS, 2008) the UK New Labour government set out its intentions for the implementation of the Leitch Review of Skills (HM Treasury, 2006) for higher education, building on the general principles set out in *World Class Skills*:

Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England (DIUS, 2007), which envisaged greater employer involvement and government prescription in determining educational and training content across UK post-compulsory education. This included the desire to see universities working with the government-sponsored but employer-led Regional Development Agencies, responsible for economic development and regeneration activities in the English regions, the Sector Skills Councils, responsible for representing the views of employers in each sector as regards training and development for the workforce, and *'local employers to develop the higher level skills that a particular business needs in a particular sector in a particular place'* (DIUS, 2008, p.7). This was in addition to a pledge to *'encourage more effective working between professional bodies, SSCs and higher education'* (DIUS, 2008, p.31). Whereas the wider implementation of the Leitch recommendations across the UK skills system required the necessary co-ordination and co-operation of various agencies, educational institutions and training providers, the implementation of recommendations for higher education were more equivocal about the extent of direct engagement required between higher education institutions and wider skills system. This open-endedness of the policy was reinforced by the commitment to a *'deliberately experimental'* (DIUS, 2008, p.31) period in which the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) would be encouraged to *'test and invest in a range of approaches'* (DIUS, 2008, p.:31). This enabled higher education institutions to exercise a degree of choice in their level of engagement with wider aspects of skills governance, including the Regional Development Agencies, Sector Skills Councils and various other 'employer-led' bodies.

This article briefly examines the significance of governance structures in the context of the workforce development programme element of the implementation of the recommendations of the Leitch Report. Particular attention is paid to higher education institutions in what used to be termed 'the public sector' in an attempt to understand the nature of their level of engagement with skills governance. The analysis is based on evidence from workforce development projects funded by HEFCE as part of wider skills policy, a parliamentary select committee inquiry into the implementation of the recommendations of the Leitch Review,

and a series of interviews with managers of workforce development projects at higher education institutions. The focus on the context of the former ‘public sector’ institutions reflects the fact that the majority of the workforce development projects that were funded by HEFCE over the period 2006-09 were based at institutions that had become universities since 1992.

Governance and higher education

‘Governance’ is here taken to mean the structures through which policy is made and implemented, taking account of the fact that the more unitary structures of a past era of ‘government’ in the welfare state have been replaced by a web of interrelated agencies with a variety of functions within the system (Rhodes, 1996). This web can include central government, local government, national, regional and local agencies, private and voluntary sector organisations and a range of other bodies representing the interests of certain groups. In trying to understand these complex systems, contrasting approaches to power can be taken. Power can be centrally located with governmental authorities, but applied through ‘*the extension of the state*’ (Frederickson, 2005, p.294) to influence policy activity and programme delivery. Alternatively power can be seen as diffused through policy networks or communities which government needs to engage with to deliver on policy objectives (Rhodes, 1996). Portrayals of a strong centre in governance systems suggest that what has changed in the transition from government to governance is not the location of power but only the means through which power is exercised. In other words, central government uses a different way of controlling the way things are carried out, through more subtle forms of co-ordination that have replaced a direct approach of command and control. In this model, the stress is placed on steering mechanisms (Neave, 1998; Rhoades & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2007) which are used by central government, or subordinate agencies, in order to ensure that other parties involved are ‘steered’ towards an ‘appropriate’ path or consensus. Norms of (self) control emerge which are then institutionalised and embedded within institutional culture.

The alternative model portrays a system in which a weak centre has progressively lost power to policy networks which ‘*are a challenge to governability because they become autonomous and resist central guidance*’ (Rhodes, 1996, p.667). Networks grow around particular issues and interests, with the governing centre struggling to promote its views and needing to compromise with other actors. Processes of negotiation abound, and non-central actors often

prevail and take responsibility for activity, in a system where no one actor is able to dominate (Kooiman, 1993). Most significant to the model is the notion that the centre is powerless to stop networks and communities attaining some form of autonomy, becoming '*self-organising*' (Rhodes, 1996, p.660) and effectively resisting whatever manipulation may be attempted by the centre.

The changing relationship between U.K. higher education institutions and government

The relationship of higher education institutions and government has been transformed from the deferential and partnership approach of the post war years to a mechanistic and managerial 'system' which, as suggested by Tapper and Salter (1978), paralleled the fragmentation of elite structures within U.K. society in the 1960s and 1970s. This shift in relationship has led to the emergence of a recognisable 'higher education sector', with policy-development and implementation mechanisms that are often contentious, competitive and non-consensual. Whereas the limited number of institutions and the elite nature of higher education in the pre-1960s world led to a consensual, informal approach, supported by the 'buffer' of the University Grants Committee (Kogan & Hanney 2000, p.143), the more explicit establishment of a societal and economic role for higher education, which emerged through the Robbins report and the creation of Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) and, later, the polytechnics, resulted in increased competition for funding, influence and alternative conceptions of 'higher education' (Niblett, 1981). Through the economic readjustments of the 1970s and 1980s, the British education system became increasingly identified as both the reason for low productivity and the mechanism through which future prosperity could be secured (Wolf, 2003). Higher education was increasingly seen as a necessary part of the economic infrastructure of the nation, responsible for the provision of an effective labour force. The Robbins committee, in stating four aims and objectives for higher education, including '*instruction in skills for employment*' (Robbins, 1963) was reflecting the transition to an environment in which the expressed purposes of higher education increasingly needed to acknowledge the perceived economic imperatives. Whereas higher education had previously not been much more than a 'cultural apprenticeship' (Ainley, 1994, p.25) for the majority of students, its contribution to the economic and societal objectives of the nation became increasingly explicit. Institutions that had developed from the 'service tradition' of education (Robinson, 2007) and had origins in local linkages with industry, local government and the public sector professions, were to become the key vehicle through which

this role, and student numbers, would expand (Robbins, 1963). Pratt (1997, p.26-9) documents this through the rise of student numbers in the 1980s and early 1990s, which occurred predominantly in the polytechnics. Some institutions doubled in size over a ten year period, offering courses that would primarily sit within vocational or service traditions, including engineering and technology, management and business studies.

Institutional perspectives towards government and the legacy of the public sector ethos

The ‘public sector’ institutions had a perspective on relations with government that reflected their origins. They had become part of, or had developed from, local administrative structures, with processes and management that did not envisage a role akin to a traditional university. The notion of a ‘consensual’ partnership, to which the established universities were accustomed and through which policy would be made, was a somewhat alien concept, as these institutions initially had neither the influence nor capacity to participate in such a policy-making process (Kogan & Hanney, 2000). Until removal from local authority control with the Education Reform Act of 1988, and incorporation with the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, each polytechnic could, theoretically, lose its status, or be significantly undermined, as a result of its relationship with local government (Pratt, 1997, p.276-7. Aspirations for status, however, grew, as is documented by Kogan and Hanney (2000, p.133-7), with the polytechnics developing a national network, in the shape of the Committee of Directors of Polytechnics (CDP), and an increasingly influential presence within the national policy arena in the 1980s. These aspirations focused on removal from local authority control, and increasingly, of a funding relationship with national government that replicated that of the universities (Kogan & Hanney, 2000, p.155). Despite the continuation, since the ending of the binary divide, of processes of ‘academic drift’ in the post-92 institutions (Burgess & Pratt, 1970; Pratt, 1997; Sanders, 2002), there is a persistent ‘public sector’ approach in some institutional strategies and missions, even though many have now diversified their range of activities to conform more to dominant ‘university’ models (Tysome, 2007).

Plan and provide or entrepreneurialism

Suggestions that participation in the policy outlined in *Higher Education at Work* may be more appropriate for those institutions with a heritage in the ‘service tradition’ could suit elitists, who view the provision of skills for the labour force as the *raison d’être* of the former

polytechnics (Higgins & Forster, 2010). This '*plan and provide*' (IUSS, 2008b) role for the post-92 sector, as discussed by Mr Gordon Marsden MP in question 308 of the 'After Leitch' Innovation Universities Science and Skills (IUSS) Select Committee inquiry, suggests that educational institutions have some obligation to engage with the overarching objectives of government, including those that involve national skills policy. The commitments made in *Higher Education at Work* in respect of the workforce development programme seem to indicate that some co-ordination between the wider skills system and higher education institutions is desirable, as the government pledges to ensure there is an '*effective brokerage service for higher level skills*' (DIUS, 2008, p.7) and wishes to see institutions working with RDAs and SSCs, playing a '*key role in solving local and regional problems*' (DIUS, 2008, p.7).

The 'plan and provide' mentality contrasts with the entrepreneurialism in evidence at some post-92 institutions (i.e University of Hertfordshire, 2007). In addition, the range of initiatives incorporated within the workforce development projects funded by HEFCE indicates that the use of capacity building funding to bolster the flexibility of the institutional response to employers was widespread (Kewin et al., 2011), often to develop 'front desk' capacity or to enhance the 'structural capital' of institutional processes (Garnett, Workman, Beadsmoore & Bezencenet 2008). The consequences of these initiatives may possibly include greater work with local employers, although this is not guaranteed as institutional strengths may not necessarily align with local, regional or sectoral priorities. HEFCE may no longer be able to focus on '*encouraging the troops*' (IUSS, 2008c), as Gordon Marsden MP suggests in q461 of the 'After Leitch' inquiry, as the response of the post-92 sector may be insufficient to meet these objectives. The relationship with government and with a centrally-driven strategic approach to providing for the labour market may have become increasingly obsolete as institutional ties to local and sub-regional governance structures and major employers have become less essential for institutional survival.

Governance and higher skills – 'pig's ear' in the 'dog's breakfast'?

The policy environment of higher education is quite different from the policy environment in which skills policy in the United Kingdom operates, which is perhaps more obviously a system of considerable central government activity, with mechanisms that can be described as a 'steering' form of 'governance' similar to those applied across the public sector (Kikert, 1997). The skills sector is notorious for its organisational complexity, the multiple

relationships which it encompasses across the private, public and voluntary sector, and for existing in an atmosphere of continual change and uncertainty (Hodgson, Spours & Steer, 2008). The 2009 report into the implementation of the Leitch review, carried out by the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee, stressed how witnesses providing oral evidence had described:

‘how training and skills provision looks to those who come into contact with it: “a pig’s ear or a dog’s breakfast”, “a very complex duplicating mess”, “almost incomprehensible”, “astonishing complexity and perpetual change.”’ (IUSS, 2009, p.5).

Attempts to map the network of organisations involved with skills invariably fail to do justice to the task, as relationships are often multi-faceted or indefinable, and accountabilities and responsibilities only partially clear, perhaps even to those in central government. The picture is made considerably more problematic by the existence of interested parties at national, regional, sub-regional and local level, all of which enjoy different relationships with parent, or partner, government departments, and many of which have different perspectives on both current and future performance. Some of these bodies, for example local authorities and bodies associated with or appointed by them, can be seen to have some semblance of local democratic accountability, even though their role is often prescribed by national government. Other bodies, for example the now defunct Regional Development Agencies and the Learning and Skills Council, became increasingly responsible for delivering national schemes at a local or regional level during the New Labour era (Croden & Simmonds, 2008; Hodgson et al., 2008). The tendency towards national control and restriction of local or sub-regional discretion intensified with the publication of Leitch (HM Treasury, 2006) and the implementation document, *World Class Skills* (DIUS, 2007). This was exemplified by the creation of the United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), which aimed to *‘depoliticise’ the skills agenda by securing a broad political and stakeholder consensus for the UK’s world-class ambitions for 2020 and beyond’* (HM Treasury, 2006, p.23), steering the ‘skills system’ towards the Leitch targets. The variety of organisations, local and regional boards, plans and strategies relating to skills could be seen to have created an exceptionally confused example of governance, with multiple accountabilities and funding streams, and potential duplications of effort. Higher education institutions, entering this policy environment, may feel somewhat mystified by the array of initiatives and organisations, perceiving few opportunities for worthwhile engagement.

Excluding institutions and ‘providers’ from governance

A key tension within the implementation of skills policy lies in unresolved questions relating to the relationship between education and the workplace (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough & Halsey, 2006), and the extent to which individual and employer demand should be balanced with discretion over the ‘supply’ of knowledge content by the training provider or educational institution, and ultimately the teacher or lecturer. The approach over the New Labour period, in common with all governments since the 1980s, was to increasingly prioritise preparation for work to the exclusion of notions of general education for life (Keep, 2006, 2008). This resulted in reductions in institutional discretion over provision in the further education sector, with greater prescription from the Learning and Skills Council, ‘contestability’ to encourage employers to exercise greater choice over provision, and input from local and regional governance structures (Hodgson et al., 2008). ‘Employer-led’ governance mechanisms were used, with employers or public sector agencies dominating on the Employment and Skills Boards, at a local or sub-regional level, or the Regional Skills Partnerships at regional levels (Croden & Simmonds, 2008). Leitch tended to ignore the complexities of ‘supply’, preferring to focus on ensuring that the perceived demand from employers for skills was satisfied:

‘Lord Leitch suggested that there was a ‘triangle’ of skills provision, with employers, individuals and the Government all playing a role. He did not address in detail the role of training providers, whether in HE, FE or privately funded.’ (IUSS, 2009, p.5)

‘Training providers’ and the institutions increasingly characterised within this category, the further education colleges, and their staff, were largely excluded from key decision making structures. This reduced genuine opportunities for the development of the co-operation and trust within the skills system that is often identified as vital for productivity improvements (Keep, 2006, 2008). Commentators on public administration within the skills policy area have identified the lack of trust and discretion as a significant obstacle to successful skill formation, and focused on the importance of *‘institutionally embedded trust relations, especially in terms of the coordination of agencies, departments and institutions involved in skill formation’* (Brown, 1999, p.238) as a means of embedding sustainable formation of skills, consequent productivity improvements and wealth creation. This would seem to

contrast with the centralisation and prescription inherent in the government response to Leitch (DIUS, 2007), although one might suggest that the ‘*deliberately experimental*’ (DIUS, 2008, p.31) approach of *Higher Education at Work* might invite opportunities for trust to develop within networks of organisations.

The Leitch approach to the implementation of skills policy relied primarily on a ‘planning and control’ model of implementation, building on top-down archetypes (Hill & Hupe, 2002; Sabatier, 2005), meaning that a failure to achieve goals set out in implementation plans is often conceived of as a failure of process rather than a failure of policy. If attention is focused on the sites at which implementation is taking place, the neglect of involvement of teaching and training staff could be seen as potentially leading to implementation ‘deficit’ (Hill 2005, p.177-8; Hill & Hupe, 2002), although deficits and unintended consequences can be perceived as an inevitability in all complex implementation contexts (Lipsky 1980; Majone & Wildawsky, 1979). It is clear from many union pronouncements of the time (UCU, 2007), or the contribution of delegates at a conference organised by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) (Lee, 2007), that teaching staff and those concerned with individuals within education and training were in far from full agreement with the analysis of Leitch.

How engaged were higher education institutions with the governance infrastructure?

The extent to which higher education institutions engaged with the skills infrastructure in developing and implementing their workforce development projects appears to be limited. Certain institutions, as a consequence of their ‘public sector’ culture or strategic intent, may have felt they were interested, or duty bound, to undertake this form of engagement. However, other institutions may have questioned whether such engagement was necessary or helpful for the strengthening of their workforce development activities. Of the over thirty projects funded between 2006 and 2008 by HEFCE under the workforce development initiative, only 6 clearly describe their projects as involving engagement or brokerage arrangements that involve skills governance organisations, including Regional Development Agencies and Sector Skills Councils (HEFCE, 2009). The most complex of these projects involved ‘*Cogent Sector Skills Council and the Higher Education Academy Physical Sciences Centre in partnership with the University of Hull and a consortium of five lead higher education institutions*’ and an initiative led by Skillset through Bournemouth University to bring together ‘*major employers and leading media departments at 15 English higher*

education institutions (HEIs) to form a group of 'Media Academies'' (HEFCE, 2009). The Sector Skills Councils stand out as being the most engaged in the 6 projects listed, with much of the remainder of the skills infrastructure largely absent. This may reflect the distinctive context of higher skills and the capacity of individual higher education institutions to engage individually on their own terms with the agenda, thus bypassing the governance mechanisms that envelop both the further education and the private training provider sectors. Moreover, the involvement of the Sector Skills Councils cannot be regarded as evidence of sustainable institutional engagement with wider skills system, particularly as many of the Sector Skills Councils have themselves been highly critical of the existing skills policy governance structures (Alliance of Sector Skills Councils, 2008; Construction Skills; Energy and Utility Skills, 2008; Senta, 2008).

Attitudes towards the Regional Development Agencies

Some projects (i.e. those funded at the universities of Coventry and Bedfordshire) stated that decisions about the development of provision have been informed by the priority sectors identified by local regional development agencies (HEFCE, 2009). In these cases the regional policy decisions may have informed decision-making at the institutional level, although this does not imply involvement with the governance structures. There is some involvement with wider local regeneration initiatives, in attempts to co-ordinate higher education provision with economic development plans developed by the local regional development agencies and local authorities, for example at Staffordshire University (HEFCE, 2009). The limited involvement with, and scepticism towards, the regional governance structures echoes assertions made in written evidence to the IUSS select committee that the Regional Development Agencies did not have a perceptible role to play in meeting the objectives of policy. This is also supported by Professors Wolf and Unwin in their oral evidence to the IUSS After Leitch Inquiry (IUSS, 2008a).

The relevant written submissions to the Select Committee inquiry have reservations about the role and efficacy of Regional Development Agencies in respect of the skills system, with some criticising the extent of their involvement. For example the University of Central Lancashire states that Regional Development Agencies ‘*should not be involved in detailed skills planning*’ (University of Central Lancashire, 2008, p. 140) and Million+ stress that the experience of HE institutions in their mission grouping is ‘*one of variable RDA performance*’ (Million+, 2008, p.187). The Association of Colleges points to how the Regional

Development Agency process of *'drawing up strategies and plans results in bureaucratic competition and conflicting messages to those on the frontline'* (Association of Colleges, 2008, p.251). These criticisms are not just from educational institutions, however, as Semta, the Sector Skills Council for the advanced manufacturing and engineering sectors, stress that *'RDAs are not giving the Sector Skills Agreement the appropriate authority to inform strategy, direction and funding.'* (Semta, 2008, p.159) and the Engineering Employers Federation underline that *'the complexity of the skills infrastructure is most acute at the regional and sub-regional level'* (EEF, 2008, p.55).

Limited enthusiasm for skills brokerage

The interest in developing a 'higher skills' brokerage service, as outlined in *Higher Education at Work* (DIUS, 2008, p.7) does not seem to have materialised. Instead brokerage appears to be predominantly have been enhanced at individual higher education institutions (Kewin, Nixon, Diamond, Haywood, Connor & Michael 2011). An interview with a project manager at an HEI indicated that the institution had *'built a good working relationship'* with the key government 'skills broker', Business Link, and *'adopted that principle of integrating as much as possible with existing mechanisms and partnerships'*, recognising that *'they have much more capacity in terms of being out there with business'* (Interviewee 2, 2009). However, this was not necessarily seen as an easier route for employers to access what the institution could offer, particularly as there was a sense that the institution still needed to be proactive to ensure that *'brokers have a much better understanding of the breadth of what HE can offer'* (Interviewee 2, 2009). The process appeared to focus primarily on building links with the Business Link service, rather than transferring responsibility for 'brokerage' or employer engagement.

Attitudes towards the Sector Skills Councils

Higher education institutions were wary of Leitch's recommendation that Sector Skills Councils should play a greater role in ascribing value or validity to qualifications. This may have been exacerbated by the sense that the Sector Skills Councils had demonstrated an eagerness for involvement in some form of 'kitemarking' or evaluation of higher education provision. This can be seen in assertions that *'the employer perspective needs to be strengthened in terms of HE quality assurance arrangements'* (Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (2008, p.289), and *'the supply side needs to more responsive'* (Skillset, 2008, p.

242). Energy and Utility Skills, in their submission to the Select Committee inquiry talk of having ‘*a greater say in endorsing provision for our sector*’ and suggest that ‘*funding models for HEIs could be reconfigured to provide the incentives*’ for change (Energy and Utility Skills, 2008, p.89). This potential development was robustly criticised by Million+, the think tank representing many of the post-92 universities, who were ‘*concerned that public funding may also be tied or even limited to SSC qualifications*’, suggesting that ‘*SSCs agreeing baskets of units proposed by employers will risk the robustness of the qualifications*’ and could ‘*see no merit in an ever more complex range of educational qualifications agreed by SSCs and others*’ (Million+, 2008, p.191), seeking to maintain institutional control over notions of quality in higher education. This was supported by a partnership between a post-92 university and a further education college, who stated that ‘*In our view, their (the Sector Skills Councils’) role should not be to fund, validate or commission, but rather to inform skills requirements and planning*’ (University of Hertfordshire and Oaklands College, 2008, p.128).

The select committee inquiry demonstrated some scepticism towards the capacity of Sector Skills Councils to work in partnership with higher education institutions and to represent employers effectively. However, generalising about Sector Skills Council performance is likely to be unwise, due to their diversity, differences in their resourcing and level of recognition amongst employers in their sector (Payne, 2008).

Resistance to steering: workforce development on their own terms

The evidence discussed above suggests that the objectives set out by government in *Higher Education at Work* did not result in substantial increased engagement between higher education institutions and organisations within the ‘skills system’ to solve local skills deficits. Although some examples of partnership between institutions and Sector Skills Councils exist (i.e. Cogent + Skillset), these projects were awarded only £4.3m of the £103m funding available via HEFCE allocated via the workforce development programme (Kewin et al., 2011). The majority of funding went to institutions keen to develop their own employer-facing infrastructure in line with their wider strategic objectives (Kewin et al., 2011), which did not necessarily involve any longer term partnership development with regional or sectoral bodies. On the other hand, institutions may see involvement in local networks as an important aspect of a commitment to the local economy and local employers, and this may be a more effective route to improving dialogue around learning and skills, rather than more formal

brokerage mechanisms or partnership agreements. It may also be seen as the most effective means of furthering institutional strategic advantage, for example a workforce development project manager emphasised the importance of '*having a greater presence in the local networks...., so we can generally raise the profile of what the university can offer*' (Interviewee 1, 2009), perhaps also offering opportunities for institutions to '*mould their environments*' (Rhodes, 1996, p. 659) at a local level.

Where co-operation or joint working came about through workforce development projects this appears to be on terms set by the institution, rather than necessarily to meet wider skills objectives as set out by *World Class Skills* or *Higher Education at Work*. This may reflect underlying institutional scepticism towards engagement with public sector infrastructures, borne of experiences of the involvement of local authorities before 1988, in addition to a sense that the skills infrastructure itself has questionable authority in its claims to identify sustainable employer demand for higher level skills. Self-organisation, such as it exists in the sphere of higher education, could be seen to take place through the mission groups and representative bodies, for example via the pronouncements of Million+, the think tank representing many of the former public sector institutions, and those of Universities U.K.

Contemporary expression of policy implementation may be viewed as attempts at 'steering at a distance' (Kikert, 1997), with plans and programmes often delivered through webs of horizontal inter-organisational relationships that may serve to obscure, or dilute, power within a governmental system (Frederickson, 2005; Rhodes 1996). In the case of the workforce development programme the U.K. government made an attempt at steering the former public sector institutions towards supporting the achievement of the objectives originally set out in the Leitch Review. The commitment to '*test and invest*' in ways that were '*deliberately experimental*' (DIUS, 2008, p. 31) demonstrates the continued weakness of government in relation to institutions that were previously seen as part of the wider 'public sector'. Of course, this does not mean that the U.K. government itself is impotent as regards policy implementation in higher education. Whereas 'governance' approaches to change may have limited effect, the experiences of 1981 (Taylor, 2005) and the current period of policy change suggest that more radical approaches are never far from the agenda.

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